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## Safak Pavey acceptance speech for 2014 Secularist of the Year award

I thank the NSS for deeming me worthy of this honour. It is of great importance to me that I am here with you today. It strengthens me to know that we are not alone, that we have friends in our struggle.

I know that I am supposed to talk primarily about Turkey. Well, I just came with fresh news for you. This week, along with twitter and YouTube, the movie Noah was also banned in Turkey on religious grounds. The YouTube ban came right after a leaked recording of a conversation between military and political leaders, by which we all learned that the government members were preparing to false a flag attack to launch war with Syria in the aim of gaining further support towards the local elections this weekend. We could not decide which one was more terrifying; the content of these conversations or the way that this confidential conversation was illegally taped and leaked.

Accordingly, the state's religious affairs directorate called for a Friday sermon to be read out in all the mosques across 81 provinces of the country. All mosques made the same call yesterday saying; "Don't blow a hole in the ship's hull", meaning "vote for the government". The mayor of Ankara, from the governing AKP, cried on the TV, saying that 'if the citizens vote for the candidate of CHP – the main opposition party, I will not give my blessing to those voters for afterlife.' He added that he would chase them in the other world.

Isn't it all very exciting so far?

Last week, a Norwegian tourist in my country came across a Minister who was out campaigning for the local elections in a holiday city. The Minister stopped by to talk to him and the tourist immediately hid the beer he had been holding behind his back. There are no laws forbidding him from drinking beer or showing it. But when he saw a group of clearly pious people, his instinct was to hide his beer.

We have to be secular, to protect individuals from what triggered that tourist's instinct.

I would like to list a few more things that have taken place in my country, some of which we only found out following the prosecution recordings of phone calls between Government officials that have been leaking online since December;

According to these conversations; the Prime Minister did not know how to hide hundreds of millions of dollars stashed at his home, first resorting to immediately buying numerous new houses on the same day when police started an anti-corruption operation;

His ministers took countless bribes of insurmountable amounts. They had a fatwa issued to declare that bribery is legal from a religious perspective.

Foreign jihadists from Libya, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Chechnya and many other countries have been armed by Turkey and brought to our most multi-cultural province Hatay to fight in Syria;

According to these leaked conversations; officials were greatly worried that weapons they were smuggling into Nigeria with Turkish Airlines might be killing Muslims instead of Christians;

They have been firing Alevis, the biggest religious minority in Turkey, from civil service positions; They have shut down birth control clinics and have abolished abortion services in state hospitals without any relevant law;

It has also been confirmed that the government's dark propaganda claiming that the Gezi park protestors drank beer in the mosque where they took refuge to hide away from police brutality and that they raped a pious woman in a square, have all been found falsified by evidence.

According to the Prime Minister's own words, the judges and prosecutors are to be appointed based on 'whether or not they pray, and whether their foreheads touched the prostration', and not according to their merits as experts. Same criteria goes for the appointments of state scientists, academicians.

Believe me; this list can go on for a long time. Of course, the ratings for the Hollywood series "House of Cards" have been plummeting in Turkey since our own political reality shows have more intricacies. So, I will stop here for your sake. But I ask, in a democratic country, shouldn't just one of these be enough for a Government to step down, and officials to resign? How is then the current Turkish Government still standing, especially as it claims to be the party of religious values and morality?

Tomorrow, local elections will be held in Turkey and while the Government might be slightly weakened, according to all polls, it will still have the support of a sizeable constituency, may still command a majority. From what do they derive this power that protects them? This is my concern. But I also know the answer to my question: How can you stand against a political force whose armour is embedded with the coat of arms of the holy book?

In the Middle East, my country is always pointed to as the most modern country in the region. However due to our common majority belief, all Middle Eastern countries are variations of one another. Therefore this phenomenon is applicable to the entire region to varying degrees. The power of religion can be seen in all aspects of society, from state institutions and social organisations to individuals. Foreign policy is often conducted on the basis of religious divide. Israel and Palestine, Iran and Saudi Arabia are examples of this. It is often the basis of domestic fault lines between citizens. The most powerful example I can think of is the civil war in Syria. But we can also look at the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt or Alevis in Turkey. It is quite clear that religious beliefs affect our social and political governance and relationships greatly.

Here I would like to share a real story from my country regarding a church restoration. You may of course find it ironic for me to talk about restoration of a church while receiving an award on secularism. However, since the meaning of this story is bigger than the church, I'll take the risk. In a historic church restoration project by the Ministry of Culture, they appointed a civil servant architect to observe the project. On the occasion of the start of the project, this civil servant started laying fig tree seeds around the church whenever he could avoid the team's attention. This may be meaningless to you however it has a very significant place for our culture of faith as a curse:

The roots of fig trees spread over a very wide area. The secreted acid is disposed from its leaves while its powerful roots drains and dries the earth around the tree, destroying any building structure close to it. Therefore in our culture, the saying; 'to plant a fig tree in someone's home' is taken to mean as a curse which would destroy the foundation of a person's home metaphorically and literally. In fact, in Ottoman times, a Sultan has even decreed a fatwa to ban planting fig trees anywhere close to a building or a monument.

And here, a civil servant, who is supposed to help restore a historical building, which is a common heritage of mankind, instead hopes to destroy it from the evil powers of a fig tree because of what

he happens to believe in. He does not use any violence, there is no direct attack but his act stems from a deeply embedded antagonism due to faith differences like other faiths also have.

That is why we must be secular, if we are to respect one another's boundaries whether they are cultural, physical, personal or political and not to dry the roots of each other's existence.

The closest we have ever gotten to reconcile these differences and the only thing that offers any hope to permanently solve them is secularism. Indeed, in the Middle East, we need secularism more than anywhere else.

As a realist and as someone who believes in individual freedom, my aim is not to curtail faith or diminish the closeness individuals often feel towards God. However in order to protect the freedoms of all, we have to keep faith out of the public sphere and resist its natural inclination to spread to the public sphere.

We are going through a giant ideological struggle. The fanaticism of religion and the consequent barriers to human advancement attempts to seek refuge under the guise of cultural rights. We are taking one of the biggest gambles in human history with cultural rights. Today, religion is attempting to take the guide of culture in order to preserve its unquestionable authority that it inherits from history. The dynamics of this culture of faith is absorbing diversity, withering and eventually eradicating it.

In Western countries, this situation is paralleled through the rights of women to have control over what they do with their own bodies, or the right to carry or wear religious symbols or rights of LGBT members to marry. And I do not want to trivialise in any way the importance of these issues.

However in Turkey and the rest of the Middle East, situations borne out of the same religious instincts and beliefs concern violence towards women on the bases of their morality, violation of individuals' right to life, to work and to be able to display their identities without fear of assault on their lifestyles.

I hope you won't think this is ego, but I believe the stakes in our struggle is a bit higher.

If we fail to expose this religious invasion of culture, we will be inviting the same religious tyranny that humanity was openly subjected to in a more subtle way through public and political institutions.

The Western world visibly showed its excitement and enthusiasm towards the AKP, the Islamist governing party, when they came to power in Turkey in 2002. It was presented to the world as an Islamic country that had democratically rid itself of authoritarian secularists, instead introducing democratic Muslims. Then, it was expected of Turkey to contribute to peace and reconciliation between nations and religions in the region. But two crucial details were missed:

First of all, the Islamists had been a part of different national coalitions and local governments across the country since the 90s and therefore were very much a part of those establishments that they were complaining about.

Secondly, a democratic rule was being expected from a religion that would command the populace on all aspects of private daily life such as how to use the bathroom, how to have sex, to use private finances, to raise children, what to wear and what to eat.

The great significance of Turkey as a model was that its founder had a vision to take the unprecedented step of establishing a secular state in the Islamic world when there were no other examples before him.

The new Islamists however, had many examples in front of them after a century of the country's establishment. And nevertheless, they still chose a society that existed 1500 years ago as the model for their rule in the world of today.

We no longer have secular education in Turkey, girls and boys are separated in school classrooms, university students are separated in campuses. Evolution theory no longer has a place in school books. 90,000 mosques are used as propaganda centres for the government, including for this weekend's local election campaigns. According to the latest figures, 1 out of 3 marriages now are child brides, honour killings have increased 14 times in the past seven years.

Alcohol has become invisible outside of areas of international tourism. Civil servants and job applicants are now subjected to religious exams.

We have always had problems with authoritarianism in Turkey. I cannot and would not defend the military regimes and the oppressive state of past decades. However those authoritarian regimes took issue with what you did. Today's religious regime takes issue with who you are on top of what you do.

Islamist powers have always blamed the secularists as being elites. However, if secularism is still alive among half of the population, it is not because of the elites but thanks to the secular nature of Alevi beliefs, the poorest segment of Turkish society. This is the reason behind AKP's explicit antagonism towards Alevi minority by even having them booed at election rallies, while showing a tolerance on the surface for those tiny non-Muslim minority communities, which is very difficult to understand for those who are outside of our culture.

We are indebted to Alevis for their fortitude and their ability to keep up with their culture of folk songs and dances that are performed by women and men together that resisted against the prohibitions of the fanatical fundamentalism of the dominant culture by which the voice of a woman is considered to be sinful, where songs, dancing, sculpting and painting are all forbidden, where relationships of men and women are greatly restricted and have been for a thousand years. It is a commonly held view in our culture that if you are not pious, then you are immoral. And morality almost exclusively revolves around the chastity of women. This creates a strange relationship between sins and crime.

Supremacy of the law, by which we mean secular law, is often presented as the founding stone of the modern democratic order. It is natural that different countries apply this principle with slight variations in accordance with local cultures.

However when a large segment of a society absolutely believes in the supremacy of religious law and rejects any other kind of law, how can we convince them to accept secular law and secularist practices in their daily lives? It is not a rational or logical position but one based on faith. Arguments of reason can't counteract it. How do we separate the consequent blurring of the lines between public law and individual sin?

If the political order of a country and the public support towards political parties are determined based on piety and religious criteria, where the law is not secular in nature, how can it ever guarantee the lives and livelihoods of those who do not fit their criteria? How can it reconcile the differences of those who believe in different religions?

There have been too many conflicts of faith and victimisation of religious minorities and the non-religious, an often overlooked group. So, we can't have the luxury of not taking this threat seriously. Indeed, in many parts of the world it continues unabated. This is why secularism is crucial. In a secular state, all groups' and individual's rights can be respected and no one's belief can be imposed on another. It doesn't demand the abandonment of belief or religious practices. Only that it is kept out of the public sphere.

Unfortunately, ours is the last secularist struggle in the Middle East. Secularism has been defeated in the region and the odds are not in our favour in Turkey. In this deep cultural conflict, now it is the times of our last struggle to exist. And the outcome of this conflict will affect the entire world, to a far larger degree than Western policy makers suspect. We will continue to try to find ways to survive.

And who knows, we may beat the odds. Perhaps we should try to learn further from each other's experiences.

Finally, I would like to end on a positive note and congratulate Andrew Wale and Neil Allard, who will become the first same-sex couple to wed in the UK today. I also would like to thank two very special women in my life for their continuous support and trust in me; my mentor Jane Connors and my mother Ayse, who are here with me today. Thank you for listening to me and for your patience.